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- ✓ Communication about partnerships should allow opportunities for private and public recognition of both parties.
- **Evaluation: Determining strengths, weaknesses and future directions.** Partnerships should be developed with clear definitions of success for all partners:
 - ✓ Measures for success should be established at the outset of the

partnership.

- ✓ Partnerships should be evaluated on a regular agreed-upon basis.
- ✓ Evaluation should include collection and analysis of information to determine accomplishments, strengths and weaknesses of the partnership.

For more information, see [www.widmeyer.com/partners/guiding principles](http://www.widmeyer.com/partners/guiding_principles).

Dealing with 'difficult' parents

Mr. and Mrs. Carter storm into the school office—angrily demanding to see you immediately. They say they're "sick and tired of having Joey picked on and treated unfairly!" What do you do when difficult or angry parents like these show up at school? How can you transform a potential confrontation into a constructive dialogue?

There are no easy answers, and each situation is different. But every principal knows it is important to deal with these awkward situations effectively. Here are a few ideas to guide you:

- **Use the personal approach.** Research shows parents respond best when spoken to in a personal way rather than in a businesslike, professional way. So, talk to them as equals, respecting their efforts at the difficult job of parenting. Often the first step is to put yourself in their shoes. Ask yourself, "How would I like to be treated?" or, "How would I like someone to speak to me about my own child?" Let parents know you need to work together—as partners—to help their children.
- **See parents as caring—not just angry.** It helps to remember that most parents—even angry ones—are concerned about their children's education. Remind parents that children's accounts of what happened are often inaccurate or exaggerated and that one

purpose of the meeting is to determine the facts together. Just as you expect parents to see your side of the story, you should be prepared to see things from their perspective. When the parent and the student are right, admit it and express your strong desire to help the child.

- **Schedule appointments.** Most schools have the policy that conferences need to be scheduled in advance. But if parents show up unannounced, try to greet them graciously—with a warm smile and a pleasant "hello." If possible, stop what you're doing to listen for a few minutes. Then, let them know that although you'd like to meet with them, their concerns are too important to discuss without preparation. Schedule a time they can come back—after you've had time to prepare.
- **Stay cool under fire.** Parents who are angry and unreasonably critical may blast you with an irrational tirade. Try to remain calm, even in the face of outright hostility. If you feel you're "losing it," silently repeat soothing words to yourself, such as, "I am cool. I am calm." Your controlled, quiet and firm tone of voice often will be enough to soothe an irate parent to the point where rational discussion can begin.
- **Turn arguments into discussions.**

Parent relations

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Handling anger

Your goal is to transform an argument into a discussion. For this to happen, parents have to feel their viewpoints are being respected and heard without bias. Acknowledge parents' anger by saying, "I can see that you're angry. Let's take this one step at a time." It often helps to ask parents what they would like you to do. This shows you take their feelings seriously and that you want to resolve the problem—together. Let them talk without interruption, even when you believe they're wrong. Finally, acknowledge any points they have made that are true. Admitting your mistakes—or those of a staff member—may be uncomfortable, but it can diffuse parents' anger.

- **Outline parent concerns—in writing.** Taking good notes helps document your meeting and prevent future misunderstandings. If possible, break down parents' complaints into key points and discuss them individually. Ask questions to clarify complaints. When you finish, summarize the main points to make sure they're accurate—and to let parents know you heard them. If appropriate, ask if they have any suggestions or solutions to propose.
- **Invite a colleague if you expect trouble.** If you expect any trouble, invite another staff member to the meeting. Also, always hold the conference in the school, during hours when other staff is in the building. This is especially important if safety is a concern or you think it will be helpful to have witnesses to what is said. When you take the team approach, discuss in advance with other teachers or administrators how you will handle the situation and what roles each of you will play. Be careful not to seem like you're ganging up on the parents.
- **If you feel abused.** Suppose, in spite of your efforts, a parent's anger continues. In a firm voice, say, "I'm uncomfortable with the way you're speaking to me. It's making it impossible for us to work

together for the good of your child. I'll be happy to continue if you stop cursing" (screaming, etc.). If this doesn't work, it's time to end the conference. Simply say, "It's not going to be helpful for us to continue today. I'd be glad to set up another meeting when everyone is calmer." If you feel physically threatened, don't hesitate to get help or even call the police.

Ask yourself, "How would I like someone to speak to me about my own child?"

- **Speak the truth—tactfully.** One of the toughest things to do when dealing with parents is to get them to see their children's shortcomings. It's especially hard for parents to hear anything negative about their children. They may feel it reflects on their parenting abilities and that they are powerless to do anything about it. That's why it's important also to mention some positives about their children's abilities, work or attitudes.
- **End on a positive note.** At the end of the conference, summarize the discussion and what actions you and the parents have decided to take. Many educators have found it helpful to have parents sign an agreement that describes what will happen at school and at home to resolve the issues. Sometimes the next step is to schedule another meeting so that issues brought up at the first meeting can be investigated. Parents need to feel that something has happened, or they'll just stay upset. If possible, save at least one encouraging comment for the end of the conference.
- **Practice prevention.** One of the best ways to reduce the number of difficult encounters with parents is to have an ongoing relationship with them.

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